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ABSTRACT

This digest presents recent findings about effective instructional practices for classroom teachers in small schools. In terms of instruction, small schools have two characteristics: a broader scope of teacher responsibilities and more instructional levels per classroom. Teachers in small schools have the opportunity to develop the student as a learner and to include collaborative learning experiences. Learning is the combined result of many variables; some are under the teacher's control and have strong effects on students' behavior, attitude, and achievement. These teacher-controlled variables include: (1) high expectations; (2) management and planning skills; (3) learning-oriented classrooms; (4) success rate; (5) appropriate learning activities; (6) engaged time; and (7) effective questioning. The typical small school classroom tends to have students with a broad range of age, knowledge, and experience, and students who attend small schools often approach each other for help and learn by teaching each other. Collaborative learning can provide a way to capitalize both on students' variety and their cooperative spirit. Collaborative learning may be used to: (1) focus on multiple ways to solve problems; (2) involve students in goal setting and self-monitoring; (3) produce positive effects through peer interaction, cooperation, and communication; and (4) organize groups to incorporate contributions of each student. Supporters of the collaborative classroom value heterogeneous student grouping; others hold the view that homogeneous grouping for instruction is sometimes necessary. This digest contains 10 references. (ALL)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools October 1990

Successful Instructional Practices for Small Schools

EDO-RC-90-12

IF SCHOOLS ARE TO SUCCEED in their current restructuring efforts, they need a renewed vision of the learning process. Essential to that vision are successful instructional practices. This Digest presents recent findings about effective instructional practices for classroom teachers in small schools. Because of their characteristics, small schools are in a good position to continue moving toward their new educational goals.

Characteristics of the small school

Often, the small school is defined by a specific enrollment figure. In terms of instruction, however, small schools have the two characteristics that follow.

- Broader scope of teacher responsibilities: Generally, teachers are responsible for many or all classroom needs. They have help from fewer administrators, specialists, and other support staff.
- More instructional levels per classroom: In many cases, broader ranges of age and ability exist within the classroom.

Instructional opportunities that build on these characteristics

Teachers in small schools have two special opportunities. The first is to *develop the student as learner*. Teachers with little time for their many roles tend to help students share more fully the responsibilities of the learning process. Many students in small schools also share responsibilities at home. The second opportunity is to *include collaborative learning experiences*, which use more fully the varied knowledge and background of the broad range of students.

Developing the student as learner

Learning is the combined result of many variables. Some are under the teacher's control and have strong effects on students' behavior, attitude, and achievement (Berliner, 1984). These variables include the following:

- high expectations,
- skills of management and planning,
- learning-oriented classrooms,
- engaged time,
- success rate,
- appropriate learning activities, and
- effective questioning.

High expectations are essential. Students need to believe in their potential to learn. Because students base their beliefs on their teachers' behavior toward them, teachers must remain especially sensitive to their own classroom behaviors that might express low expectations. When a student deals with a limited number of teachers—as in a small school—the effect of a few bad experiences is magnified. Such damaging behaviors include, for example, offering some students less time to think, less choice on assignments, less opportunity for self-evaluation, and less respect as individuals with unique interests and needs (Good & Weinstein, 1986).

Teachers cannot assume that students know how to learn. Effective teachers spend the first few weeks of the school year practicing with their students the skills of management and planning. Although many teachers cooperatively develop classroom rules, research shows that the positive effect depends on only two factors. These factors are the actual practicing of the procedures and the teacher's regular feedback about their execution (Kindsvatter, Wilen, & Ishler, 1988).

In general, teachers who effect the most student achievement establish task-oriented classrooms in which learning is clearly the business at hand (Brophy & Good, 1986; Silvernail, 1986). The organization of classroom space is important. In the classroom that serves two or more grades, careful room arrangement makes it easier to have many learning activities at the same time. Room arrangement, for example, can help peer tutoring, computer work, checking with answer keys, and student use of equipment to take place alongside group sessions (Reck, 1988).

More important than the length of the school day is "engaged time." Teachers need to ensure that students actually use enough instructional time in productive ways. Research emphasizes that time is quite easily lost in transitions—starting up, changing activities, moving from place to place, and putting things away (Berliner, 1984). Clear directions are important, especially when teachers are not immediately available. Achievement on individual student work is high when students can consistently complete work with few interruptions caused by confusion or need for help (Brophy & Good, 1986).

Equally important is success rate. When students are reviewing or practicing—engaging in drill activities or completing homework—their responses should be rapid, smooth, and almost always correct (Berliner, 1984). Success must be built into such lessons, particularly when the teacher is unavailable for help. Teachers need to anticipate where students will experience difficulty, then plan that only 20 percent of the items will be at or beyond that level (Kindsvatter et al., 1988).

Success rates increase when teachers explain the work, practice examples with students, circulate to monitor work, and provide help—*before* students begin independent work (Brophy & Good, 1986). Other activities that build success include occasional reviews and catch-up days (Kindsvatter et al., 1988). Teachers must choose appropriate learning activities, those that match lesson objectives and student needs. To choose effectively, teachers need to understand that the structure of each activity either limits or enhances the learning process in some way (Berliner, 1984). Activities vary.

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Computer-managed instruction, for example, can offer short or long practice sessions, immediate testing, and private diagnostic feedback. Instructional television can provide more extensive course offerings and can include students in cultural events not common in remote areas. Computer networks, moreover, can help both students and teachers overcome feelings of isolation and motivate learning (Helge, 1983).

Effective questioning can be the core of meaningful learning experiences for students. In fact, the more often teachers ask questions, the more students learn (Silvernail, 1986). Mixing both factual questions and higher-order questions throughout the learning activity produces better results than using either type alone.

Higher-order questions are, however, essential for all students. This may be a problem, since up to 95 percent of the questions in workbooks, tests, and teachers' manuals are lower-order (factual) questions. Teachers should beware of relying too heavily on questions from these sources.

The benefits of higher-order questioning are substantial. A typical student exposed to a lesson without higher-order questions may be expected to perform at the 50th percentile on a related test. In contrast, that same student's exposure to the lesson with many intelligent higher-order questions would perform at about the 75th percentile (Berliner, 1984).

Including collaborative learning experiences

The typical classroom in the small school tends to have students with a broad range of age, knowledge, and experience. Even when small groups or tutoring pairs are not formally structured, interdependence among students is a striking quality of classrooms in small schools (Dodendorf, 1983). Students who attend small schools often approach each other for help and learn by teaching each other. In small schools, collaborative learning can provide a way to capitalize both on students' variety and on their cooperative spirit.

Teachers use collaborative learning experiences when the *focus of instruction* is on multiple ways to solve problems. Students could, for example, be asked to decide how the country might differ today if certain explorers had changed their routes. Teachers encourage students to listen to diverse opinions, support claims with evidence, think critically and creatively, and participate freely in meaningful discussions. Students ask and study related questions that interest them.

The extended times in a small school when students need to learn without direct teacher help require sustained *student involvement*. When students work collaboratively, they are more involved in setting their learning goals, choosing among options, and monitoring their own progress (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1990).

Varied models of cooperative learning—which have peer interaction, cooperation, and communication—produce *positive effects* on achievement and attitudes. Student-to-student links can lead to more complex thinking processes than are common during teacher-student contact (Kindsvatter et al., 1988). Use of such groups can also help students to move toward self-regulated learning (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1990).

Collaborative learning requires *special preparation*. Teachers need to organize groups so each student can contribute. They need to find resources. And they need to explain and model how to think critically and how to work collaboratively.

Supporters of the collaborative classroom value heterogeneous grouping so all students can share and learn. *Another view*, however, is that sometimes homogeneous grouping for instruction is needed. Some educators continue to believe that grouping for beginning reading instruction—and for dealing with very heterogeneous classes—is justified. Groups may, in these circumstances, be based on students' ability, achievement, or language dominance (Brophy & Good, 1986).

Will effective instructional practices always raise achievement?

In two small rural schools, teachers increased their use of some of the techniques of effective instruction. The changes, however, had little effect on student achievement (Marzano, Guzzetti, & Hutchins, 1984). The lesson is that educators should not assume that change in a few variables will improve achievement.

Real improvement requires the interaction of *many* variables. Improving students' management skills, for example, may not help them think and solve problems. When *combinations* of effective practices become a regular part of teaching routines, however, they are much more likely to improve achievement (Berliner, 1984).

The characteristics of small schools can be a teacher's ally. In small schools, one teacher, using a variety of successful techniques, can exert influence across the entire range of variables that cumulatively lead students toward high achievement.

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